

A Few Thoughts on the Double-Parashah Vayak'hel-Pekudei / Shabbat HaChodesh – March 17, 2023
Exodus 35:1 - 40:38; Exodus 12:1-20; Ezekiel 45:18 - 46:15; Samuel I 20:18; Samuel I 20:42 Hazzan Leah Frey-Rabine

Shabbat HaChodesh is the 4th of the special Shabbatot that fall between the beginning of the month of Adar and Pesach. It occurs on, or immediately before, the first of Nisan, the month of Pesach. Because the first of Nisan was the day on which HaShem announced to Moses the impending Exodus and presented instructions for its preparation, Nisan is our most important month. Therefore, the first of Nisan is the beginning of the Jewish liturgical year, and the reign of kings was also calculated from that date. In addition, it is the first new moon of spring, the time of awakening. The month of Nisan has four additional names: *Rosh Chodeshim* (The Head of the Months), *Chodesh Ha-Aviv* (The Month of Spring), *Chodesh HaRishon* (The First Month), *Chodesh HaGeulah* (The Month of the Redemption). It is assigned to the Tribe of Judah, who inherited the kingship and from whom the Messiah is to come. The overarching message of Shabbat HaChodesh is the obligation to delineate sacred times by establishing a calendar. As slaves in Egypt we had no control over our time, but with the Exodus we were given the freedom to determine our time along with the commandment to sanctify portions of it. Midrash Shemot Rabbah 15 explains: "The ministering angels said to God, 'Master of Infinity, when do you declare the festivals?' God said to them, 'You and I will accept whatever Israel calculates.' The Holy One of Blessing said to Israel, 'In the past they were in my hands. But from now on, they are in your hands.'" Indeed, the price of autonomy is responsibility, reflected in the terms of our eternal covenant, which is predicated upon gratitude for and acknowledgement of our special relationship with HaShem, and expressed in the rituals performed by the priests in the *mishkan*. But why do our parashiot repeat and elaborate the details of its construction and outfitting, which were interrupted by the incident of the golden calf? Precisely for that reason! It is noteworthy that the root קהל (to gather, convene) is used two different times: Last week the people, upset and frightened by Moses' long absence, gather around Aaron to voice their concerns; and some, but not all of them engage in egregious, forbidden worship. Now, after long and difficult negotiations to dissuade HaShem from destroying them, Moses convenes the entire population, repeating and elaborating on HaShem's commandments regarding the *mishkan*, which will now be completed under his watchful eye. But he begins by reiterating the commandment to cease working on Shabbat along with the dire warnings against disobeying, and then adds: "You shall not kindle fire in any of your dwelling places on the Sabbath day." (35:3) For most of human history, making a fire was hard work, and this explicit prohibition simply emphasizes that we are not supposed to work on Shabbat. But of course it has sparked much debate concerning the reasoning as well as ongoing controversy over what fire entails today. Talmud Tractate Shabbat 70a discusses it at great length, concluding that: "It was singled out in order to equate the other labors to it and to tell you: Just as kindling is a primary category of prohibited labor, and one is liable for performing it on its own, ... It was singled out to divide the various labors and to establish liability for performance of each of them." Italian-Israeli scholar Umberto Cassuto (1883-1951) notes that HaShem only allowed the people to express worship with material offerings within the confines of the *mishkan* and the Temple, where fire played a prominent role. The explicit prohibition of kindling fire is therefore a polemic against the pagan custom of lighting festival fires in the home as well as a subtle reference to the connection of fire with the golden calf, i.e., adopting the idolatrous practices of the surrounding populations. Unlike pagan cultures, we do not sanctify physical objects of divine or of human creation. We only sanctify time, and our yearly, monthly, and weekly round of festivals commemorates the events and ideas that shaped us. The principle of Shabbat is the unique expression of a unique relationship between a people and their unique deity. The man HaShem designates to lead the project is named Bezalel, which literally means "in the shadow of God," which signifies that if HaShem rested after six days of creation, so too, must we rest after six days of work. Shabbat is the most enduring and eloquent sign of our eternal covenant, and observing Shabbat is how we demonstrate that not only are we upholding our part of it, but also, that we appreciate this priceless gift. We need Shabbat for our own physical and mental wellbeing, to give us strength to deal with the challenges of daily life; but how we keep Shabbat is a personal decision. Even though many of us might not do so in strictly orthodox fashion, we all can make the day special by refraining from doing what we do in our workaday life. For one day a week we can disconnect and just simply be. The Hasidic masters teach that the sacred space of the *mishkan* now resides in the Shabbat holiness contained in our hearts and souls. To access it, we simply have to make time to open ourselves to its power. Ezekiel 46:1, part of our special reading for this Shabbat, prophesizes that the gate of the inner court of the reconstructed Temple will be closed on the six working days but opened on Shabbat and Rosh Chodesh. We have no Temple, but Shabbat, our wonderfully rejuvenating day of rest, endures. In the words of Ahad Ha'am, the founder of cultural Judaism, "More than Jews have kept Shabbat, Shabbat has kept the Jews."

Shabbat shalom!